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SUBJECT: SHOTGUN WEDDING: UBCV AND VBS TOGETHER AT LAST?

REF: A) 2002 HCMC 914 B) HANOI 807 C) HANOI 842

1. (SBU) Summary: In a meeting with the Consul General on May 9, Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang spoke hopefully of a new openness on the part of the GVN toward efforts to unite the UBCV with the officially recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS). The Patriarch, who was allowed to travel to HCMC after more than 20 years of "pagoda detention" in rural Quang Ngai Province, was also realistic about the roadblocks ahead. Repeatedly denying any interest in "political activities," he said his overwhelming goal now was to unify the two Buddhist churches. Crediting the USG and other members of the international community for past and present efforts on behalf of his cause, he stressed the UBCV was not quite ready to make it on its own. Still, Thich Huyen Quang claimed the majority of Vietnamese Buddhists were really still "his", even if the UBCV organization itself had grown weak. He concluded by saying he was still "measuring the situation," but realized "things outside are very complicated." End summary.

2. (SBU) Consul General and ConGenoffs met with Thich Huyen Quang at An Quang Pagoda, the former principal pagoda of the UBCV and current home of the HCMC Buddhist Sangha, the southern branch of the VBS. The meeting was arranged by UBCV General Secretary Thich Tue Sy, who also attended. (Note: Unlike previous calls on members of the official VBS hierarchy at An Quang, this visit did not require a diplomatic note or notification to the local MFA branch. While it is clear GVN officials would have had to approve today's meeting, it is remarkable that we were allowed to work the appointment entirely through the offices of the "outlawed" UBCV.) In addition to the two UBCV leaders, three high-ranking VBS monks, with whom ConGenoffs have met in the past, also attended.

3. (SBU) Thich Huyen Quang appeared in fairly good health, but harder of hearing and less focused than during an October 2002 meeting at his pagoda in Quang Ngai Province (ref A). He said he was satisfied with the medical attention he had received in Hanoi and was confident that his needs would be met in the future (ref B). The atmosphere during the meeting was much more low-key than during the visit to Quang Ngai. Despite the presence of high-ranking VBS monks in the room, he spoke openly and comfortably. For their part, the VBS monks refrained from the frequent interruptions and prompting that had marked the behavior of the Quang Ngai authorities. (Thich Huyen Quang twice referred to the heavy-handed tactics of his handlers during the October meeting in Quang Ngai, apologizing for their rudeness.)

4. (SBU) Recapping his April meeting with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in Hanoi (ref C), Thich Huyen Quang was clearly pleased that the PM had publicly acknowledged the contributions of the UBCV "to the resistance". He also appreciated the PM's sending someone to check on his health in Quang Ngai. He had pressed PM Khai for the release of detained UBCV leaders, including himself and Thich Quang Do. He had also asked for written documentation of the reasons for the continued detentions, and an official statement on the legal status of the UBCV. While PM Khai did not answer those questions, he promised to act with "Buddhist mercy and compassion" in his future dealings with the UBCV. In return, Thich Huyen Quang promised to respond with "Buddhist tolerance."

5. (SBU) Thich Huyen Quang had spent 20 days in his hometown of Quy Nhon, reconnecting with the UBCV faithful before traveling to HCMC. UBCV followers noted a real improvement in the way they had been treated by local authorities since his meeting with PM Khai. Thich Huyen Quang had then asked to visit HCMC in order to meet with UBCV leaders and attempt to reestablish some viable form of organization. While he did not go into detail on the logistics of his trip, he did not seem to have encountered any government resistance to his plan. Thich Huyen Quang had hoped to stay in a UBCV pagoda upon his arrival, but seemed genuinely pleased with GVN arrangements to provide him space at his former pagoda, which had been UBCV headquarters before 1975. Since arriving in HCMC, he had met with many followers and was "happy to see that UBCV believers are still here."

6. (SBU) The Patriarch requested, and was able to meet, with HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Thanh Hai on May 8. During their discussions, Chairman Hai tacitly opened the way for discussions on "legalizing" the UBCV through integration with the VBS. When the Patriarch asked Chairman Hai if the two churches could be merged, Hai responded that was an internal matter to be resolved by the two churches -- but he believed one day there

would be a single, unified church. Thich Tri Quang, head of the HCMC Buddhist Sangha, also attended that meeting and supported the concept of unification. Based on Chairman Hai and Thich Tri Quang's responses, the Patriarch said he believed the GVN really wanted to heal the schism within the Buddhist community. Showing off HCMC as the nation's economic engine, the People's Committee took Thich Huyen Quang to the new Saigon South urban development area - where upscale villas cost USD 800,000.

17. (SBU) After some prodding, Thich Huyen Quang briefly summarized his May 5 meeting with number two-ranking UBCV leader Thich Quang Do, who has been under administrative detention in HCMC since June 2001. During the meeting, Thich Quang Do had emphasized the need to get the UBCV's own house in order before opening negotiations with the VBS. Long years of operating as an underground church had taken their toll and left the UBCV splintered and disorganized. Thich Huyen Quang deflected several attempts by ConGenoffs to elicit predictions on whether Thich Quang Do's administrative detention would be lifted on schedule this June. He did note that the meeting had ended with Thich Quang Do saying he looked forward to visiting Thich Huyen Quang and continuing the discussion in Quy Nhon. (Thich Huyen Quang told ConGenoffs he would be returning to Quy Nhon rather than Quang Ngai after leaving HCMC. He plans to use An Quang Pagoda as his base of operations for meetings in HCMC from time to time.)

18. (SBU) Assessing the likelihood of merging the UBCV with the VBS, the Patriarch noted, "agreeing is easy, but the process is difficult." He placed great stock in UBCV "(human) assets and property" as leverage, claiming that many VBS monks and nuns are actually UBCV followers. While the UBCV still holds a number of properties that had escaped (or been spared) confiscation, he hoped the GVN would consider returning other former assets. He said he expected to meet with the VBS to discuss a merger in the near future. He hopes the two churches will be allowed to sit down and discuss - free of GVN interference - their merger, and that local authorities would allow the UBCV to reconstruct its organizational framework. Thich Huyen Quang described a future unified church which would steer clear of politics, focusing its efforts on spiritual matters and charitable works. While he acknowledged that some Buddhists had participated in political activities in the past, he stressed the need to concentrate on religious affairs during this time of peace.

19. (SBU) A recurring theme in the 75 minute-long meeting was appreciation for the efforts of the world community and international media in supporting the UBCV cause. The Patriarch expressed thanks to the many countries that had allowed UBCV Buddhists to maintain the 2000-year-old tradition of Vietnamese Buddhism overseas. Asked what the USG and others could do to support the peaceful integration of the two Buddhist churches, he noted the importance of continuing international support for and media attention to efforts to train new monks and nuns, organize UBCV activities at the local level, communicate with believers overseas, and build a UBCV public information apparatus. He also cited pressing needs for renovation of many UBCV properties.

110. (SBU) Another recurring feature was Thich Tue Sy's strident voice interrupting the Patriarch to drive home his own call for continued international support for the absolute separation of church and state in Vietnam. Citing the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, he insisted no true religion could ever submit to a secular authority ("there are no worldly ends for us"). While Thich Tue Sy said he would work within the framework of the Vietnamese Constitution, his determination to pursue "pure spiritualism" outside the supervision of the Fatherland Front and Communist Party seemed at odds with Thich Huyen Quang's resigned pragmatism. The difference in viewpoint was clear in their responses to a question on whether the GVN would allow interviews with foreign journalists. While the English-speaking Thich Tue Sy immediately responded "no problem," the Patriarch's more reserved answer after hearing the Vietnamese translation was, "depends on the Government."

111. (SBU) Comment: ConGenoffs have previously met with VBS and UBCV monks separately. But together in the same room, we found less tension between the formal VBS-UBCV adversaries than between the two UBCV leaders themselves. The VBS monks sat silently by while the elderly, revered Patriarch of its UBCV rival listened patiently to the strident demands of a monk whom he himself has anointed "executive director" of the UBCV once it "gets its house in order."

112. (SBU) Comment (cont.): It is too early to tell whether the GVN, VBS, and UBCV are really ready to mend fences. The actions of "hard-line" elements who might push the envelope right off the table should also be taken into account. While Thich Huyen Quang's recent travels, meetings, and pronouncements are something we could not have imagined last October, no one at today's meeting made any concrete predictions for the future. Thich Huyen Quang closed the discussion by saying he was still "measuring the situation," and acknowledged "things outside are very complicated." The next signal to watch for may be whether the GVN renews Thich Quang Do's administrative detention when it expires next month.

